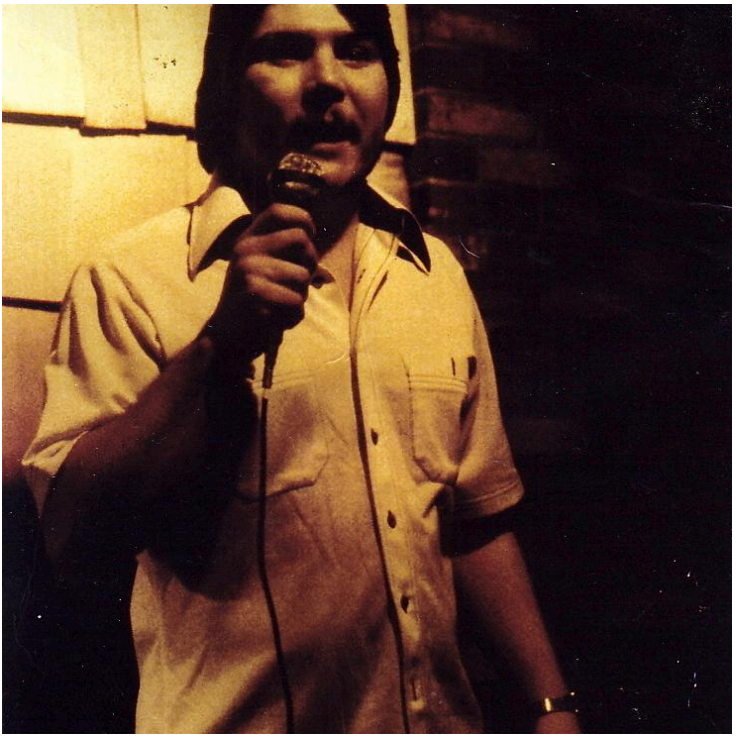

Pictured: my father,

'THE COMEDIAN'

Content warnings for language, drug abuse and addiction, mental health, familial trauma, and suicide.

The author wishes to remain anonymous.
He would like to remind the reader that suffering is a part of the human experience. That your pain is real.
That you may hurt, you may feel lonely and sad and stare into the darkest corner of your ceiling at night,
wondering when the pain will end.

There is nothing to be afraid of -
There is always the grace of love.

I love you. I love so much, it hurts.
I am proud of you for making it through the day.
I can't guarantee the pain will end.
But I can guarantee that if you try to leave this world before your time, it will not work.
You will live all of your days,
Every single one until your hair is gray and gone
and your knuckles can no longer bend
and it is for you to choose how to live them.

Please don't let the darkness win.
Please don't succumb to bitterness and self-pity.
Live fully and authentically.
We cannot die when we choose
- and when that time comes
and it will come, in 20 days or 40 years -
it is the end of who we believe ourselves to be -

Laugh with unfettered joy in the face of certain annihilation.

Pictured: Jerome "The Sign" Seinfeld
President and CEO of Comedy, Hollywood (not my father)

I.

NOTES ON A MENTAL BREAKDOWN

Late autumn, 2012 - My stand-up comedy debut at the weekly, Tuesday-night open mic at a bar under the JMZ train on the Bed Stuy-Bushwick border, a narrow strip still mostly-untouched by gentrification during my last visit. I possessed seemingly all of the requirements to begin a career in comedy - crushing loneliness, a six-year run of compounding personal failures, a weed and dissociatives habit that danced a horrible tango with a colorful cocktail of prescription drugs (when I felt like taking them), unresolved PTSD, undiagnosed and untreated ADHD, and, *crucially*, the lack of any positive male guidance for most of the 24 years I spent stumbling towards the stage.

Not to fear, as I was prepared. I wisely chose to spend the entirety of the previous night awake on a mixture of prescription amphetamine and dextromethorphan to ready my material. I had been cooking up the idea of getting a sketch comedy troupe together and was able to secure a meeting with a funny-seeming performance artist over OKCupid to meet me at the bar to witness my debut and discuss plans to hijack the world of comedy. (This plan would, I assume, include bypassing the UCB/PIT gatekeepers to access venues and making additional friends who didn't mind working with a guy who didn't have a job and smoked PCP in a loft.) I was wearing my favorite piece at the time - a loudly-purple sweatshirt with a large, stylized graphic of Ol' Dirty Bastard's face printed on the front. I was nervous but buzzing on enough sleep deprivation-induced hypomania to make my way through the opening acts.

Okay, I might've not gotten a *lot* of preparation done the night before. I had a joke - well, I had a *prop* that *led* into a joke, a keen piece of storytelling centered around this AK-47 lighter I bought in a gas station. Was there a punchline? I am unsure, but I knew that the second I took the stage, my instincts would take over and the audience would be so taken with my charm and delivery that I could probably say *anything* and win them over. I may have not garnered the best reputation at that open mic during my previous visits - one of the hosts, an aging folkie who had an unfortunate crush on an attendee who herself had an unfortunate crush on me, had begun announcing me to the stage with a guarded weariness. I may have proven to be an inconsistent - some would even say awful - performer, but I would dazzle him nonetheless.

Indeed, I had been a frequent guest at this open mic. While this would be my first foray into comedy, I brought my musical stylings to the stage several times before. Music was what brought me back out to Brooklyn in 2010 - following my grandmother's death, I decided to utilize what meager sum she left me to attend audio engineering school in Manhattan and live closer to my girlfriend in Brooklyn. We had met at an art college just around the time I was in the process of being kicked out, during my last failed semester where I realized it was a lot more fun to make and play computer music than attend any of my film classes. It was also a lot easier to make music by myself than it was to make films or videos, and the friends I would eventually make let me DJ their parties and didn't care if I went to classes or not. (They did actually care though - after I almost fell off of a roof while DJing on the edge of an adderall/klonopin/rum blackout, they gave me a mini intervention.) It was alright, though! I left Brooklyn, got clean, spent a year in a 12 step group working the steps with an awesome sponsor, and was ready to

return to Brooklyn to take a shot at music production with a clear head and support from family, friends, and a girlfriend I was in love with.

And here I am writing about 2010, ending paragraphs with prepositions. Granted, it's hard to properly unspool a tale of mental health without taking any left turns or opening any of the matryoshka dolls that illustrate greater patterns when you finally line them up next to each other. And, truly, this story is a matryoshka in itself - a drug-addicted, traumatized, fatherless, morally-gray aspiring comedian I briefly knew as my father before his death in 2000, the album I made about him in 2010 (aptly titled *The Comedian*), the extended rock-bottom that began with my own attempt at comedy in 2012, and this present work, an adaptation of *The Comedian* where I try to make sense of my own struggles and finally take a shot at telling my own story.

This piece will take the structure of the album itself to provide some scaffolding for the stories of two fairly chaotic lives. The first track's title is a remnant of the original impetus for the project - an adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which I was never talented enough to adapt musically - and keeps the title of the collection's first story, "Notes on a Mental Breakdown." Aptly, in my own headcanon, this instrumental was meant to represent my own mental breakdown as a path to learning more about my father, and, to wit: a 2007 suicide attempt in my dormroom both kicked off my journey into psychiatry and led me back into the care of the therapist that helped treat my father's lingering Vietnam-War-related PTSD.

Incidentally, he had previously been my therapist when I was around 5 or 6 and began dealing with malignant shame and guilt because dad was still in the habit of calling me bad when I did bad things instead of the actions themselves. (I'd assume this

was learned behavior, although I'll leave my own complicated relationship with his mother to the side for now.) He had it tough from the start - his biological father died in a drunken plane crash before he was born, which, hey, might provide a thematically rich angle to begin discussing his story, especially if you, like me in 2010, have a shallow understanding of Greek mythology.

II.

GRANDPA ICARUS

Father of my father was a drinking man. He drank and he flew and he fell, spiralling downwards from the heavens like Icarus reborn in the sun. I guess his wings were made of waxen things and his feathers were not all that strong. Father of my father was a bastard, man - having a bastard as his son.

Late autumn, 2008 - Welcome to one of the haziest parts of my timeline, one that is so immensely difficult to piece together that I have to start with a just-the-facts approach to begin to make sense of it. Fall of 2008 was my fourth and final semester at college. I don't recall seeing a single classroom. I *do* recall finally having friends who just moved off-campus into an apartment that I would spend most of my time at. I can pin down right around when my first-ever arrest happened - sometime in November after Obama was elected (thanks, Obama), where the spirits on Brooklyn were high and I consistently did my damnedest to outdo them. The buddy who I bonded with over a mutual love of Irvine Welsh and drugs finally got his hands on heroin and was eager to finally try it with me. I still greatly preferred the previous drug he had introduced me to, ecstasy, but I would try anything at that point and when you have a friend to do drugs with, well, you do drugs with them.

One of my many lucky breaks was that the arresting officers never found the baggie of heroin I stuffed between my buttcheeks before throwing me in the holding cell. I probably hadn't actually done any heroin prior to being picked up; I was drunk, stoned, and on a few psychiatric meds to give the weed and booze a bit of a boost. The trip from my friends' apartment to my dorm was about a 20 minute walk; the five-minute drive I instead opted for led to a stop at a checkpoint where an officer, in disgust, told me to just get on my way. Thinking I had narrowly escaped a DUI, I drove a couple blocks to the *next*

checkpoint where I was detained, arrested, and booked with that heroin baggie in my butt and my favorite coat, which had about 900 dollars cash in its inside pocket earmarked for a pound of weed. For whatever reason, I didn't get the coat back on my way out of the precinct the next morning, and thus froze my ass off in central booking waiting to get bailed out alongside a group of similarly unfortunate men.

I feel Icarus was a clumsily-chosen metaphor for my meditation on the cycle of substance abuse and its ensuing wreckage, but I can certainly chalk up my first charge to something akin to the hubris of Daedalus's doomed son. I wish I knew enough about my real grandfather to say the same about the crash that claimed his life - the idea that he went up into that plane with enough liquid courage to down it is nearly apocryphal, but its impact resonated through two generations of men. There's the war story my therapist shared about my father, tasked with minesweeping duties on a day where he felt his time was better spent enjoying that pure, sweet Vietnamese dope. One of the members of his unit came into the war an Olympic hopeful; he would be sent home missing a leg due to my father's dereliction of duty.

It would take six months from that first arrest to finally get my Icarus moment; a few thousand in legal fees later, I'd be legally barred from driving in New York for that same half-year period. Considering it was my first offense, the DUI got talked down to a DWAI (driving while ability impaired), which is a non-criminal driving offense. My dalliance with heroin would be short-lived - after a 90 day trial period, both my buddy and myself agreed to stop. Personally, I was not a fan; it made me mostly feel itchy and a little dirty. Due to some strange genetic leapfrogging, I've never really had the taste for my father's drugs of choice -

dope, coke, and booze - and found it fairly easy to kick. My friend was not so lucky. While we initially agreed to just snort the stuff - a pact I kept to, since I'm thankfully adverse to sticking a needle in myself - he withdrew *hard,* got a stuffy nose, and started slamming the stuff between his toes. This would be the end of our partnership.

Dad's path both on and off dope was quite a bit different. He grew up in the 50s and 60s, mostly unsupervised in his mother's bar. Like Forrest fucking Gump, dad got polio when he was young and spent a portion of his youth in leg braces; also like Forrest fucking Gump, he would eventually grow beyond the need for them and find a bit of purpose playing sports in high school. His mother would eventually remarry to an Irish policeman who I fondly remember as grandpop; by all accounts, he did try to fill a fatherly role, but he would never adopt my dad as his own. The path forward is spotty - he got into petty crime and the trouble associated with it. Ever the black sheep of a growing clan of Polish Americans, he would find any way to escape his home, and like many young adults, saw the Army as the perfect way out. This was in 1966.

The precious few Vietnam war stories I've inherited through his therapist may or may not make it into this piece, depending on if and where they may fit. The track that originally followed "Grandpa Icarus" was a cover of the Television Personalities' "Mentioned in Dispatches" as a nod to my father's war years; it was an easy excision, a period of time I couldn't begin to relate to in any useful sense, and whose stories include civilian massacres, the murder of an American G.I., and volunteering to duck into dark tunnels with a flashlight and a .45. (Forrest Gump - also a renowned tunnel rat.) There were the PTSD freakouts he'd get around trains, tied to hazy memories of

crossing the border into Laos on them. There are stories that will never be told, records that will never be provided, medals that were boarded up in my grandmother's attic and, in spite of my efforts prior to the property being sold, never recovered.

For my father's two tours in Vietnam, he received a relocation to Columbia, the best possible place for a soldier with a years-now heroin habit, especially if you'd like to catch him using and finally give him the dishonorable discharge freeing the government from all responsibility for his condition. Unlike Forrest Gump, he returned to the U.S. spoiled on pure Vietnamese and Columbian dope, and found his local offerings greatly below the needs and demands of his addiction. It quickly became an economic concern - he couldn't afford to buy 10 times the amount to meet his needs, and would mostly shake the habit, leaving him only untold amounts of trauma to remember his time fighting for democracy, a 20-year-old disgraced vet staring down the rest of his life in a country boiling with social and political turmoil.

At the end of 2008, my 20-year-old self would be dishonorably discharged from art college for dereliction of duty and sent back to New Jersey to begin a life in self-imposed exile, with little-to-no plan other than to keep using drugs and making music. (The use of third person *is* a distancing tool.) I was getting worse, guided by appetites and obsessions and neuroses, unaware and unbothered by the effect it had on my family and friends; pity my long-suffering mother, dueling with two sons struggling in their own ways to answer or avoid the question: what kind of man are you going to grow up to be?

While we'd both inherited the old man's gift of gab and penchant for bullshitting, my brother would put it to good use in a career in sales. I am consistently impressed by his ability to buy

in - from shady cell phone sales, to MLMs, to pharmaceuticals (legal), he possesses the traits essential to making capitalism work for him: a pathological desire to fit in and a morally ambiguous approach to business underpinned by a strong moral certainty that his way of life is Good and Right. (He is a conservative.) On the other hand, I embodied my father's worst characteristics - shady, defiant, consumed by the pursuit of my own pleasure - and our grandmother would treat us accordingly, twin aspects of the same son personified. My brother would spend time with her, watch Bill O'Reilly, and then casually ask for 20 grand for a paint job for his car. (The new coat magically made the car appear to be a different make and model.) I would spend 20 minutes arguing with her about my choices in life, ask to use the bathroom, and tiptoe to the drawer she kept her cash envelopes in to get money to buy drugs.

Either of us could make the argument that the money would've ended up in our pockets anyway, and in May of 2009, it did. Her last words to me were "be good to your mother." I spent most of her funeral nodding out on klonopin, which made some people think I was just going through a really rough time; in a sense, I was relieved. My own mother had nurtured a resentment in me towards my father's; out of respect for both (and in the spirit of the latter's dying request), I'll say nothing other than I felt at peace with her passing. Two weeks later, I took a handful of my mother's various fun pills (likely barbiturates and opiates), lost consciousness, got into my little silver Hyundai, hooked a left out of my cul de sac, and t-boned my neighbor's parked car. Again, Icarus was a *terrible* metaphor to use here.

Pictured: Bill "Cooper" Hicks
Only successful comedian from Austin, TX
(legally exempt from being a father)

III.

THE SAD COMEDIAN

To the world outside my tears, I refuse to explain -
Oh I wish it would rain!

Late autumn, 2012 - If you've never performed on a stage in front of a crowd before, you'll likely be surprised by how hot and bright the lights are. Somewhat old hat for me - I did theater back in my all-boys Catholic high school (initially because it was the only activity that included the fairer sex) and, of course, had been on stage at this particular venue. I am not a born performer, not in any useful sense; the self-awareness I possess now in my mid-30s didn't start to develop until the last quarter of my life, and having no useful concept of how you're perceived by others is a massive blind spot for anyone hoping to step in front of a crowd. The most generous assessment I can give myself is that my "act" was always less of an act and more an unraveling, which, at its best, made the audience deeply uncomfortable. I've always been a fan of outsider artists and musicians - Wesley Willis, Jandek, Daniel Johnston, those bravely baring their souls and creating out of compulsion and a desire to connect their inner world and experience to those willing to give them the time. Those whose insides burn with a fire so virulent that they can't help but pull back their heads, open their mouths, and let the black smoke and ash free into the aether.

If you also do very little preparation, miss a night's sleep for eight hours of chemically-assisted dissociation, and drink a couple beers to calm the nerves, you'll experience the paralytic toxin of the observer - a whole room of observers - expectant, bored, likely waiting for their own turn on the stage, maybe a little nervous if they've seen you perform before. You are not ready. You have no material. You sputter and stutter nonsense, trying any way to connect to the audience, to make them laugh at

your open mic comedy debut, your 10 minutes in the warm glow of the stage lights. After three minutes, the emcee mercifully asks you to deliver your big set-ending joke. You have nothing but that fire in your stomach, so your head rolls back, and you open your mouth, and the smoke rolls out, choking the room, displacing all of the oxygen, and you admit to a room of strangers that you'd been planning to kill yourself before walking straight off of the stage, out of the venue, and into the cold autumn evening.

I've prodded my mother quite a bit on my dad's year-long effort to give stand up comedy a go. This would've been in the mid-80s, before my brother was born - the quiet ultimatum: *you have one shot at this before we start a family*, one year before the fucking around stops and a lifelong love of comedy takes a backseat to paterfamilias. Mom took an inactive but supporting role, and dad took to playing the clubs, beginning the paying-dues grind that you only hear successful comedians talk about with a sense of fondness. I don't think she went to many of his shows, and she couldn't even give me a decent understanding of his material. The rough sketch is it was mostly lewd and offensive - this was the era of the Diceman, and even as a kid I recall him making a lot of off-color jokes - and none of it got any kind of a reaction other than when he started to get more personal and talk about his mother and childhood. Isn't that the cliche? Good comedy comes from your experience? We're currently living post-Tig Notaro's *Live!*, when a successful standup set can just be talking about the most painful, confusing, and terrifying aspects of your life, when maybe announcing my suicidal idealizations could've worked as a great opener. (Great fodder for the "you're not allowed to be funny anymore" guys bitching that it's more acceptable to talk about mental struggles than to string together slurs and stereotypes, but White God

bless Trump for making comedy legal again.) Beyond that, all I know is that he opened once for Gary Shandling and he was kind of a dick.

Inconsistent material aside, what really fucked my dad's fledgling career were vodka, cocaine, and pills. (Unspoken in the phrase "party like a rockstar" is the asterisk that further defines rockstar as someone who has already reached a level of success that permits them to toss their liver on the roulette table night after night.) There's a dark period of over a decade where my father's history is almost completely unknown to me - from VietNam until meeting my mother in the early 80s - aside from glimpses I've gathered from conversation with mom, like how her dorm was only a few blocks from the halfway house he was staying in around the same time she was pursuing a degree in pharmacy. Safe to assume he kicked the substance, but not the habit, and fell warmly into the 70s drug culture - one in which mom would describe her coworkers at her first hospital pharmacy job freely using the on-hand dexedrine and valium to make the day go easier, and where the freewheeling experimentation of the 60s turned into dark, mindless hedonism under the cloud of the 70s dark social and political climate.

The end of his year long stint at standup lead to a similar reckoning with that habit - no more partying, it's time to settle down, raise a family, make an honest woman out of my mother (not exactly the dishonest one in the pairing); it wasn't until after my brother was born that he finally sought help for his drinking and became a friend of Bill W., beginning a shakily-maintained sobriety that lasted until his hospitalization and death. There's still a plaque of the serenity prayer up in my childhood home, right of the front door to remind you, on your way out, to ask God to grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot

change, the courage to change what we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. I would become acquainted with this following the accident in '09, during my first hospitalization, the only in a dual-diagnosis unit. (Dual-diagnosis is for patients dealing with both mental health and addiction issues, which I protested heavily my first couple days in the ward.) There I'd get *my* first real taste of 12 step in the nightly meetings brought in by volunteers from Narcotics Anonymous. I was immediately struck by the messaging, everything they spoke resonating clearly to a set of ears previously and willfully stuffed closed. By the time I got out, less than a week later, I took their advice to heart - when you get out, get to a meeting. Find a sponsor. Come once a day for 30 days.

You always get a white key tag at your first meeting - AA does chips, NA does the colored key tags to celebrate milestones. The other biggest difference is the big hugs you get coming in from the street, opposed to AA's firm but caring (?) handshakes. You sit either in a circle or in rows of folding chairs facing the folks running the meeting. You tell a room of people your first name and that you're an addict, and they say "HI COMEDIAN!" very exuberantly. You get the key tag when they ask if it's anyone's first meeting and you raise your hand; everyone applauds and hollers and then people who are celebrating milestones - 30 days, 60 days, 90, 180, 9 months, 1 year, and a year and a half followed by yearly milestones, which one can receive tokens to celebrate. The guy I awkwardly asked to be my sponsor at the end of the meeting was accepting a token for some 20 plus years of clean time - not sobriety, clean time, because the AA guys say you can be sober and drink and alcohol is still a drug.

I'm frontloading what now seems a tad culty, even as I'll still defend the good the organization does for its members; the

most crucial aspect - one that really can't be untangled from the stated purpose of the group - is it targets the vulnerable, just not in any way that supports a power structure or really saps any resources from its members other than the time one might volunteer to service in their church. There are still ways my time in NA - I'd say a year of active participation - fucks with my head; they're often outweighed by the actual focused work I did on myself by working the steps with my second sponsor, a man I chose because I wanted to work with him, a guy who - like my father - struggled with many years of hard drug addiction that left him with HIV, but who, like me, was a sensitive, irreverent, artistic, deeply goofy bisexual man in a stable, monogamous relationship with a partner he loved and cared for, the first time I had ever met a positive male role model living the kind of life I could actually envision for myself.

I owe a lot of the development I've made in the last decade or so on the groundwork I laid with my sponsor; when I've tried to thank him in subsequent years, he'd politely accept a brief phone conversation before reminding me that he doesn't have friends that use. He was getting into his late 40s when I met him, and his HIV status always worried me because I knew when he got sick like dad did, he probably wouldn't come back. I had a feeling one day a few years ago and looked for an obit; he passed in 2021, having at least met his goal of becoming a published author in the years before. He lived authentically, open and aware of his own shortcomings, with joy and the kind of zest for live you have to earn by living from birth never knowing life could ever feel so good, that the struggle of living doesn't have to be misery if you live it with intention of bringing joy, peace, and a sense of comfort to others. I didn't believe in the transformative power of the love of another at the time, and there would be much more evidence I'd need to collect before I

would, but goddamnit if the guy who let me use David Bowie as my higher power/God didn't provide the earliest, most compelling case.

I fell out of step 9 months into the program when I relapsed, which meant I had to give up my progress towards a year - I was looking forward to that tag - and completely restart the steps, which, after a particularly grueling time completing 4-7 - in NA, the steps where you take an inventory of your life, share it with your sponsor, and ask for forgiveness - killed all of my recovery steam. I was feeling better anyway and I was in love, ready to return to Brooklyn to be closer to my partner at the time. I got a place to stay, found a job, and said my goodbyes, only to face the end of the relationship almost immediately after I moved, the return of that great pain, and easy access to the substances I used as a salve for it. (I am placing no blame on her - I was a wreck prone to self-pitying and self-harm in the face of turmoil.) I fell into music, the only thing I felt I had left other than the shame of relapse and failure. We got back together a few weeks later, but I was never quite the same, and rudderless, I decided to spend my meager inheritance on audio engineering school and rent.

Between our breakup in the summer of 2011 until the end of 2012, I did nothing. I have a few releases to show for it and a bit of blog steam, a few mastering gigs, but a year and a half is spent in a dissociative fog, freely using while taking my psychiatric meds (protip: $^{don't.}$) and living the life of an unstable, lonely, drugged-up artist in Brooklyn. Late September, my latest project seems to have run out of steam and as the days get shorter and darker I get more into the idea of doing comedy. I mean, I love making people laugh, right? I love watching standup and sketch comedy. I was the kid who shot and edited dumb

comedy videos with my friends in high school. My father was a comedian! He loved to make us laugh - the bit he was most fond of sharing was about the Hungarian guy who'd come through the neighborhood pushing his little cart on the hottest days of the summer hocking shaved lemon ice. In an accent I'll never get out of my head, he'd tell us how he'd travel up the streets yelling, "LEMON ICE, LEMON ICE! IF YOU LIKE-A YOU BUY, IF YOU NO LIKE - GO TO HELL!"

Pictured: Tony Clifton
Free speech defender, at-large
(physically unable to be a father)

IV.
ABSENTEE FATHER

My dad is alive
Somewhere in space

Mom and dad had different tastes in music; hers was about what you'd expect from a sensitive, nerdy boomer - obviously lov- ed the Beatles when she was a kid, had a Peter Paul and Mary record, got into Simon & Garfunkel when they were still a viable duo and really settled into the proggier, softer worlds built by the Moody Blues. She liked Pink Floyd - not sure to what extent; the times when I'd be drinking and hating the world while listening to dogs aren't those I'd like to imagine sharing with my mother - and Elton John and *of course* Billy Joel. Dad was a little older, had the pre-British Invasion doo wop records soundtracking his youth - The Platters, The Coasters, assumedly other tableware based groups - and never found the rock and roll stuff as interesting as what Motown was putting out. His favorite band was the Temptations - sampled in the hook of "The Sad Comedian" - and his favorite artist was Marvin Gaye, who gave me the easiest possible pull for an album about daddy issues. "Absentee Father" starts with the "father, father" from "What's Going On", vocoded, out of time, until the song shifts around 2 minutes in and "father, father, father, father" matches a pounding 808 kick on the quarter notes.

I liked both! When I was left alone at his mother's - an apartment over the long-closed bar she raised my father in - they still had a working jukebox that I could play tunes from that era on. I loved being at Nana's - there were plenty of places for me to hide, to get lost in. I was - probably by necessity - a leash kid when I was taken to malls, because I'd immediately find the easiest rack of clothes to hide in and have my private time. I

liked to hide, especially with my headphones on, which I can only imagine as an adult was an endlessly stressful nightmare of exasperatedly calling for a kid who was hiding in the top of a closet with a Weird Al tape on full blast.

I liked to play pretend - with toys or others, but as the others got more into playing sports it became me and the toys. There were a lot of kids in my neighborhood near my age, but they all went to public school and I went to a small Catholic school a town over. Allow me to speedrun my neurodivergence red flags:

- Hard time making and keeping friends
- Really good student until around grade 5 (when I actually had to focus and study)
- Spent most of my time in class drawing comics
- Spent the remainder of the time looking out the window and daydreaming
- Did no homework - why would I?
- Could not wrap my head around the changing boy/girl social dynamics popping up around 6th grade
- Absolutely top of the class in standardized testing
- Less and less friends as I got older - we're into girls now? We're performing for them? Huh? You guys are bullying me now?

I could have gotten earlier intervention for at least ADHD, but my parents were fighting a lot and my brother generally was the one who had trouble learning in school, so if I was having trouble, it was probably because I was just lazy. At some point, my dad got into a really terrible accident that left him permanently disabled, and things got worse; he'd never touch a drop of drink until he'd die, but he rediscovered the warm embrace of barbiturates and opiates, now prescribed by a professional. There were so many nights where he just appeared out-of-it on the couch, or as I used to tell mom, "dad's mush-mouthed right now." As a stay-at-home, dry-drunk dad, he was mercurial - bipolar or not, lacking a daily routine can begin to unravel a man. Fights got worse. My brother might've gotten the worst of it, in a sense. He looked up to our father, who had opted to coach every sport we ever played, to take the role of an active, involved parent he lacked as a kid. My brother was an athlete, the first baseman. I was the kid kicking dandelions in right field who wanted to read books. My brother would bear the disappointment of dad lying to him constantly and breaking promises. I was made no such promises, and was just generally happy to be included when they went fishing. I loved to dig in the wet river mud.

To his credit - my dad was enthusiastic, funny as hell, quick witted, and caring - maybe not about the kid he really didn't understand, but he had a very close relationship with my brother, who still thinks of him incredibly fondly. He took an active role in sponsoring others in AA, even if that sometimes meant leaving me alone locked in his truck outside an apartment in Irvington - a pretty bad area outside Newark - to chat and smoke weed with his sponsee. (The warm, welcoming shores of alcoholics anonymous, where you can still blow herb and take

pills and be safely considered sober. Later on, I learned the weed was meant for his appetite, which was negatively impacted by the treatments for either Hep C, HIV, or cancer, but I also think he just liked to get high.) His wake and funeral (spoilers?) was a revolving door of dozens of people whose lives he touched in the program.

Remember the guy whose leg got blown off because dad got too high for mine duty? One night, he gets a call from a New Brunswick dive bar that he frequented back in his drinkin' days. The bartender either knew him or had a phone book on hand, because some one-legged raging drunk was shouting my father's full name, saying he was going to kill him for ruining his life. Dad gets in his truck and heads to the bar - about 20 minutes from our home - and spends the evening working it out with the disgruntled vet. He apologizes for what he did in the past but offered his own experience with recovery and sobriety - his chances of being an Olympic athlete were ruined by a dumb, horrible thing my dad did, but what he was doing to himself now with the liquor was his own fault. The man who started his night wanting to sew vengeance ended up seeking help.

There's a deep fear I have in sharing everything in these pages, untangling a lifetime of shame and guilt and bad decisions, putting it all on paper and having someone who may have only met me recently or not at all read through it all and know a part of myself I've kept in quarantine. Stories like the one I just shared keep me writing with the small hope that someone who has been struggling like I was might get something out of the darkness I lived in for so long. The PTSD I've endured is nothing compared to what my father had to contend with, and even as all of his bad decisions eventually caught up to him and killed him, he managed to spread some light into the world to

offset the creeping darkness that beckons the weak, the afraid, the guilty, and the ashamed to submit.

What do we inherit from our parents past those trillions of spiraling, replicating staircases packed tightly within our cells? What are we forced to carry? How many of their fights become our fights? Were the blow outs between mother and brother just iterations of those we hid from as kids? How much of the intense guilt I meant to feel when caught in a lie was a chiseled haut-relief of the repeated violations of trust in their marriage? How much of the pride my mother takes in me is in living as a better version of the man she married? How many of the disappointments she's expressed in both of us are echoes from a canyon between the man he was and the man she wanted him to?

In the beginning of the last quarter of my life, I began using psychedelics with the intent of healing, hot off of the crop of research papers popping up after scientists were once again allowed to study the effects of psychedelics in the late 200s. I spent a day attempting to shed all of the negative feelings I've acquired towards my mother and release all of that emotional baggage - a process involving a lot of massage and crying - I became surprised as the layers of *her* familial trauma began to emerge from within me, crying harder and harder as I saw a lonely, bookish, socially-awkward girl struggle to impress a demanding, overbearing mother and connect with a father who mostly enjoyed beer and quiet yard work. We are our parents - their successes, their regrets, their traumas, their failures, and often and tragically their final hope at a meaningful life.

To his credit, my brother learned the right lessons from my father. He coaches his sons' lacrosse teams. He's incredibly active and involved in their lives. His four kids - my three

nephews and one niece - adore their father, and truly - they are his world. He doesn't drink or do drugs. He has dad's personability and salesmanship buoyed by a follow-through the old man always lacked. He's a pillar of his community, will do anything for anyone, and does not get along with my mother. (Like father, like son.) He made a conscious effort to stop lying - a habit we'd picked up as a tool from dad and as a defense mechanism from mom - and is the hardest working guy I know.

I didn't learn quite the same skills. I learned to hide - myself, my problems, my thoughts, my feelings - from the man who didn't understand his weird younger kid and had no positive framework for discipline. The tension between them became tension between the siblings - I was mom's kid, he was dad's kid - and my father's disregard became my brother's disregard, often curdling into resentment over the times I'd curry dad's favor. (Only one time, really - I'd always catch more fish. I was otherwise inadequate in comparison.) There was the time I got caught fooling around with a neighborhood boy, and my dad got called over, and while I'm pretty sure the other kid got beat, my memory cuts to black as soon as that door opens. I don't believe he was homophobic - I was privileged to not be raised to hate any group of people - but he probably thought I was funny from the start. (Not funny ha-ha, funny queer.) He would be partially right.

I asked our shared therapist about repressed memories - mom had gotten it into her head that I was locking in something terrible, maybe something to explain why her dear boy was so fucked up and miserable and couldn't remember so much of his childhood - and he correctly pointed me towards the pseudo-science aspect, the organic version of those AI hallucinations where your mind is happy to make up a fucked up thing that

happened to you in the past if you ask it desperately enough. His assessment, etched with Occam's razor, is that I spent so much of my childhood blocking out the bad stuff and retreating into my own imagination that the memories appearing to be missing were never formed in the first place. I spent so much time building little worlds in my head, looking at shadows on the ceiling and watching them dance, living halfway between our world and another dimension, desperate to invite others in and perpetually incapable of doing so. My best friend for a period of years was a small stuffed platypus named Percy. I wrote comics about him, took him everywhere, talked, went on adventures, and when my dad got sick, he'd be there to talk with in my favorite hiding spot under the bed.

A marriage that had been teetering on divorce, propped up by a stubborn Catholic mindset, finally found a stable ground as I passed into puberty. After a week at a bed-and-breakfast in Rhode Island, my parents came back happy. They went out to dinner more, tried new things, and renewed their vows. They'd give each other kisses even, ick! For a couple of years, things were happy at home, even as my brother's academic and social troubles increased, the attention eclipsing my own issues - I didn't share those as openly, though, and nearly gained an ulcer at 9 for trying to keep my struggles to myself. Having stability at home, though - as well as two boxer pups, one bought impulsively by dad and the other as revenge by mom - gave those years a glow. Then, one day, my dad went to the hospital, and never came home.

Pictured: Attorney General Roseanne Barr
Overseeing the immolation of woke comedians Katt Williams and Samantha Bee, White House Correspondents Pyre 2026
(possibly hooked up with my father, he was an all-caps DOG)

V.
BRAINTUMOR

How do I feel? Now?

Early winter, 2012 - The suicidal idealations that bubbled up in my first standup set were percolating. The year was coming to a close. I had few friends and associates I'd gathered since moving back to Brooklyn, a couple of roommates, a PCP dealer named Flex who up and disappeared at one point, and an overwhelming sense that the end was near. I had what would be an ego-massacring dose of DXM at the ready, having become convinced the best way to confront my pain was internally. (Hindsight: psychedelics would've been more effective than dissociatives here.) Late one December evening, I prepared a big bowl of pills - 50 red tablets at 30 mgs a piece - ate 'em, popped on a movie I enjoyed and sat for the effects to begin. Everything began to pixelate. The movie would skip frames, scenes entirely. My awareness drifted outside of myself. I could rotate around my being - zonked out, and covered in what seemed like some webbing that stretched out beyond the boundaries of physical space. Everything went away, and when I regained consciousness, six hours had passed. I had not moved. Our high loft windows invited in the morning sun.

While both classes of hallucinogens have shown to have therapeutic benefits, there are some key differences between psychedelics - psilocybin, LSD, mescaline, MDMA (if you're being taxonomically generous) - and dissociatives - DXM (the good stuff in OTC cough medicine), PCP, and ketamine. I had my first dissociative experience on accident - dentist's chair, "would you like some sweet air?", "oh wait, let me put on my headphones", and while a medical professional routed through my mouth I drifted into some strange heaven while listening to

Sigur Ros. My first experience with really gettin' high had a similarly music bent: my metalhead suitemate introducing me to weed with a highlighter-sized joint that made me think I was Jesus while listening to Dark Side of the Moon. Drugs made music sounds better, and regarding specifically weed, dissociatives, and psychedelics, those were the hooks. I could just listen to music - my favorite method of self-isolating - close my eyes and watch my imagination sprawl. Early on in these misadventures, psychedelics became less viable as the anti-depressants I was prescribed rendered them useless.

With the experience of having taken both without any prescribed medications, the reason I consistently trended towards dissociatives was the afterglow of a high-dose experience. No disrespect to McKenna's heroic fungal fortunes - psychedelics almost alway leave me drained and in need of serious recovery by the next day. MDMA coined the term "blue monday". Dissociatives leave the body like a fairy winking at the end of a grand adventure and handing a little gold ring to remind you that everything you learned and experienced was real, the end of a children's fantasy almost. While this is conditional to the intent you set going into using these, you will likely spend the next few days walking on some cloud, still charmed by the magic of another realm. (It's what ultimately led me to return to ketamine as an antidepressant in my more recent years - it just works.) Drugs like PCP and nitrous get an appropriately bad rap - nitrous is a concentrated dose of brain cell killer that's not fun enough to justify the slaughter and PCP is the kind of drug that is too loaded with power and potential to be available in any way.

It's been said that different drugs will bring out different aspects of your personality, and the effects vary based on user and intent. PCP has a deservedly awful reputation. My

experience with it was actually mostly positive - the worst parts were the sojourns to Alphabet City to wait hours for the worst drug dealer in the area to finally ride his bike over - but I liked the kind of energy work I could do with it, the limits I could push my body and mind to, the way I could visually see the frequencies and sounds in the air as I was mixing music. The last time I ever used it resulted in the most intense yoga session I've ever partaken in, entirely instinctual and intuitive. For a guy with experience with dissociatives and music, great time. For *anyone* else - anyone - it is not in any way a recommendation. I introduced a couple of friends to it at the time; one threw up the whole time because he had been drinking and the other had a really good time on it.

Whether you believe in prana or not - I do from direct experience - it is a substance that wakes the kundalini snake and strips the self. Whatever intention you set, consciously or unconsciously, you will achieve it, miracle or terror. The condemned are those who enter blind. That one Wu Tang affiliate chopped off his balls. There's the guy who sliced off his face and fed it to his dog. I was keen enough to utilize Erowid - "a non-profit educational organization that provides information about psychoactive plants and chemicals" - and eventually my tripping habits played carefully with intention and setting.

In 2012, I was not so careful, not so intentional, still using as an escape, but the result of that bowl of red pills was a profound ego death; once the morning light started pouring through, filling the room with a warm glow I saw it all so clearly. The pain I'd been nurturing, the hot coals I kept lit within, the terror, the desperation, the needing for it all to be over - oh Lord, I had begun considering public self-immolation? - failure after failure after failure, a chain too heavy to wear, the shame in

bearing it, the time wasted, the money squandered, the hours and hours of music only I heard, the loss of so many futures, the clear understanding that I needed help. I needed something. As my mind reconstituted, I realized a record store down the street was just opening; I ran down there and bought two soul records - God, I needed soul, anything to make the hard light of truth feel good, to hear others feel the pain I was feeling so I didn't feel so fucking alone.

I made two return trips by the time the afternoon rolled around - Stevie Wonder, Roberta Flack, and Quincy Jones applied a balm to my soul and spirit, doing the necessary work to get through the guilt and the shame and fear and ask for the help I needed. I called mom later that evening - my second evening since I last slept - and told her what I was going through, how I was feeling, how I wanted to die and be gone forever. I moved out of Brooklyn and spent a week in inpatient, to return to my childhood home mostly as the same person who left.

Tripping in your childhood home is weird. I have a mother who will insist the small, one-story ranch house built in the 1970s is haunted; further discussion with my older neighbors would reveal the true ghost to be shoddy construction work by the developer. The psychic resonance of one's childhood, though - we have our culprit. My old bedroom comes loaded with three vivid sense memories (non-chronological):

I lose my virginity to the cute, amazing animator girl I'd been pursuing for months with snail-mailed mix CDs, long letters, and intimate musical tracks.

I wake up wailing from a nightmare, having just witnessed my mother fall into a pungee pit that surrounded the perimeter of

my school's basketball court, and she hugs me and assures me she is okay.

I stir awake. It's too dark to be morning yet. I smell Dunkin Donuts and my mother and great uncle enter my room with bad news.

The song "Braintumor" functions somewhat similarly here - it begins with a looped recording a man being interviewed on PCP -

INTERVIEWER
How do you feel?

PCP USER
How do I feel… now?

- while a grand, swelling resonance ebbs and flows, and little machines begin to whirr and click and pounding sequences of drums swirl onto the scene, 6 minutes of knob and slider manipulated noise I felt would approximate his journey to the other side. I had yet to experience true ego death at the time of recording this song; experience would confirm some of my instincts regarding the path taken out of the maya and the self, before beholding the grand wheel of karma, milling souls like my fathers outside the bounds of time.

He passed in 2000 after over a year in the hospital, cancer complicated by an HIV diagnosis that eventually metastasized to his brain, pearled up into a golf ball sized tumor at the base of his neck. It would likely be inoperable; they tried and failed. Sometime in the pre-dawn hours, the smell of fresh Dunkin Donuts filling the house, I hugged my mother and cried. I would never see my dad again, save for the emaciated, painted corpse barely resembling him in the casket, and his bones were thrown into the weird cauldron of hormones and emotions

stirring in my 11-year-old body. I wasn't just the weird kid who drew comics all day. I was now the kid with the dead dad. The quiet kid who liked to hide and read had a better reason to hide.

Setup to a memory I am loath to share because years of direct exposure have made me allergic to Brooklyn hipsters: we always spent Christmas evening with my dad's family. The Christmas directly following his death, I hid myself in the darkest possible corner, sat in a chair facing the wall and listened to the newly-released Kid A by Radiohead on repeat. Long before I would ever be close to being called cool - even as a joke - I managed to grieve and wallow in my misery to a straight 10 on the Pitchfork scale. I can warmly imagine Ryan Schieber waltzing into an open house of vodka swilling polacks, taking a few shots, and giving me a small pat on the back for crying to "How to Disappear Completely" before dipping out to score blow.

I'd never lose the sadness but I found friends once I got to high school - the guys I'd make stupid movies with, the friend whose parents let us sleep over and shoot videos in their modest McMansion, whose dad would lecture the group of us like George S. Scott as Patton, a strong-willed, sensitive, self-made successful Irish-American chiropractor who took the practice out of the woo-woo field and into a major medical group. He treated us all like sons, encouraged us to treat each other as brothers, and threatened us with violence if we fucked up his pool table. Years later, after I got my head on straight, he'd be the guy to challenge me to return to school and get a degree, the man who said he'd pay for every class as long as I got an A to show for it, and true to his word, I made it through an Associates in Science for math (reminder: I make bad decisions), graduated with high honors, and he paid for every class.

Unlike my sponsor, I didn't have to wait to hear that he passed. His son called me crying one day in 2020, said he had a stroke and was gone. His family didn't even know that he'd been paying tuition for wayward, fatherless men like me - a lovely surprise for the eventual memorial service that happened after the pandemic - and I often wonder if he'd be disappointed that I turned down the offer to pursue a bachelor's at Rutgers. We'd have dinner between semesters, and I'd tell him how I did, and he'd lecture me for most of it before cutting a check. There were conditions, of course - getting an A, which I sweated over, and once I got where I was going, to help the next person get up and through it. The couple of times I fell short - one A minus, one B plus - and I sat before him prostrated, full of that familiar guilt and shame, he showed me forgiveness, mercy, compassion; told me he was proud of me for the effort, and gave me the money for the tuition anyway. Losing him was hard.

I don't believe death is the end. I don't claim to understand it either. I longed for it - the sense of release from myself, my past, the burden of being alive - I obsessed over it before I even knew what misery really was. I knew I would die at 27, and that my death-obsession was as cliche as my pain felt unique, and all of the good things would always go away, and I just wanted to be free of it all. My first love turned out to be a weird obsession, wrongly timed and wrongheaded, and my second was a brief and devastating affair, and I longed for a home, longed for someone to make this life feel like it was worth living. At the beginning of 2016, my MacBook, the computer that stored years of material I had made, hours and hours of music, wouldn't turn on anymore. My phone died. I was working as a server at the only restaurant in walking distance. The man I christened my higher power back in the 12 step days released his final album and died. A couple weeks later, after a sleepless

night, I waited for my mom to go to work. I wrote a note, put on a record, and took a few hundred pills, giving them a solid 8 or so uninterrupted hours to end the pain for good.

VI.

SETTLING DOWN

Don't you lay my soul to rest - spread my ashes across the sea
There I'll find a simple place and wander for eternity
My life was a trifling thing, filled with liars and beggars and cheats
For me to separate myself from them I'll leave this place to seek
A quieter town and quieter life
A simple house and a simple wife
Who will bear my children and stick by my side

The middle of winter, 2016 - I regained consciousness a few times before I made to the hospital, fits and starts of my mother bawling to the EMTs, my psychiatrist looking over me sternly in the ER, the snow blowing through the ambulance's back windows - there was a blizzard that night. I spent the next three days crying in my bed; I wouldn't leave to eat, do activities, daily stretches… I was howling in pain, for all of those who I loved and lost, for my failure to finally leave this plane of existence, for every failure that led me to a small cot in a room with a miraculously patient man. I should have not been there. There were supposed to be no more tomorrows. And yet.

And yet I made it out of that room. I met a funny redheaded girl. Against all better judgement and outside advice, we'd later form a relationship. We became each other's stability and have spent the last nine years together. I got off all of my psychiatric meds - again, very much not recommended, but after opening up to my doctor about all of the basic self care I wasn't doing (sleeping, exercising, not wantonly abusing drugs), it turned out I felt a lot better off of them than on. As previously mentioned, I went back to school and got a degree in math; thankfully, I met an English professor who was perplexed that I wasn't pursuing writing based on the quality of my work, and I rediscovered my love for the form. My waiter job became a

bartender job and I soon became a beloved fixture at the restaurant. The friends who had left me for lost years ago were slowly trickling back into my life. I implemented all of the lessons my sponsor had taught me about being a caring and nurturing partner. My hallucinogen use became limited to therapeutic applications, and I emerged from my shell and became more confident every day. My sad sack cynicism and negativity became replaced by a nascent positivity - still underpinned by a fairly dark and cutting sense of humor - and my fear of people transmogrified into an open-hearted curiosity towards others.

I'm not quite sure how to square the last song on the album, the one seemingly (and titularly) about my father settling down, coming after the one where he died of a brain tumor, and I think there's a desire for the peace that evaded him throughout his entire life to be delivered in some cosmic way after death. I have a hard time understanding what I was thinking at that time - those knotty nine years from when I was sent out on my own only to return with a desire for death, so much dark bullshit I left out of respect for the privacy and a reasonable sense of shame, a near-decade exposure therapy session to confront my fear of failure.

I still struggle - depression, anxiety, self-doubt, guilt, even loneliness - but I've gathered enough positive tools to help cope and even returned to a psychiatrist to give meds another try for ADHD. When I need therapy, I seek it. I do my best to maintain friendships and as many positive connections as I can, and attempt to express my gratitude by giving of myself generously. I live in faith, but am concerned with a mystery a bit different than the one I was taught over 12 years in Catholic school about god being one thing and also three things - today I

live as if it is my last day on Earth, knowing I will not die tomorrow, that I will live a long life. Death is the end of the self but not the spirit, and there is so much more to existence than the material plane but we are bound to tend to it for the brief time we're alive.

After ten thousand words of heavy shit - might be hard to convince you that I am actually kind of funny in person. I really only have one good joke in my back pocket - if we meet, and you ask, I'll tell you - but I am not a comedian. I did one kind of funny bit at a stand up open mic in 2015. I asked the crowd to indulge me before I started my set - while I would be getting to the joke, I was being sponsored by Kraft to promote their famous mac and cheese, and had to be seen enjoying the product. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to cook it, so I popped open one of the blue boxes and began chewing the raw noodles. After getting a good mash on, I ripped open the flavor dust pack, tilted my head back, and dropped it into my mouth, coughing up a billowing cloud of neon yellow dust. Thankfully, a fella in the front row had an open bottle of Wild Irish Rose for me to wash it down with, and I did with gusto, earning groans and a couple wild cackles. Having proudly debased myself, I earned the brief moments of adoration and attention I had struggled my whole life to achieve, a few drops of blessed ichor to hardly fill the chasm of self-doubt, insecurity, and loneliness.

It was pretty funny though.